

# ***Writing on the Same Page: Teaching Writing from Kindergarten through College and Beyond***

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## **What Is College-Level Writing?**

There is no simple answer to the question, “What is college-level writing?” Even at the university level, the answer is going to vary from college to college, from major to major, and even from professor to professor within the major. But the nine teacher consultants of the Connecticut Writing Project–Storrs who contributed to this essay have two responses to the question. On the one hand, we all have a good idea of what college-level writing is, just as we have a good idea of what middle school-level writing or high school-level writing is, because we work with teachers of writing from all these different levels of education. Vertical communication and collaborative professional development provide the means for mutual understanding. On the other hand, that’s not really a question we ask ourselves. We’re more concerned with a different kind of question: What is *good* writing?

## **What Are You People Failing to Teach These Students? The Need for Vertical Communication and Professional Development, Kindergarten through College**

Just before I left RHAM High School after twelve years to take a job at the University of Connecticut as the director of the Connecticut Writing Project (CWP), my former department chair was working to promote communication between the middle and high school teachers she supervises. Over time, a certain level of distrust and even in some cases hostility had emerged between the two groups, despite the fact that their buildings are physically joined and they share

staff. The two staffs began to work together to map curricula and standardize various aspects of the curricula, such as promotional requirements and skill and text sequences. At the first meeting, the teachers realized that they didn't even know each others' names, let alone what each other did. Teachers of juniors and seniors had little to no idea what the seventh and eighth grade teachers did, and the middle school teachers were equally in the dark as to what the high school teachers had their students doing by eleventh and twelfth grades. It was eye opening for everyone to begin to learn what the others were doing in their classes. And once the teachers had met several times, the inclination to demean the work of others and to make gross assumptions about what they were—or more often were not—doing in their classes diminished. There was a great deal of newfound respect that emerged from the collaborative work that was done.

As a university lecturer and administrator who works with K–12 teachers, I see similarities in the relationship between high school teachers and college instructors. Several years ago, a graduate student colleague teaching first-year composition complained to me that his students didn't know how to write, and he asked me, “What are you people failing to teach these students in high school?” At the time, I was teaching Advanced Placement Literature and Composition, which exempted many of my students from first-year composition, and so I shot back, “My students are so prepared they skip your class!” We were really just joking around with each other, but the truth is that most high school teachers *do not* know what college instructors are teaching, and most college instructors base their knowledge of high school teaching on what they recall they did many years ago in high school.

I want to be clear that the first-year English program at the University of Connecticut does a terrific job of training its graduate students to teach writing to the undergraduates, and certainly these graduate students are exposed to a great deal of current research in the field of

composition. But the focus of their professional development is on teaching college undergraduates. There is no exposure to or discussion of teaching students at other levels (such as high school) or in other disciplines besides English (although the University Writing Center does tackle that issue). By contrast, one of the hallmarks of the National Writing Project's (NWP) model for professional development is an emphasis on bringing together teachers from all grade levels and disciplines. The importance of this kind of professional development is echoed by Merrill J. Davies in her essay, "Making the Leap from High School to College Writing," in the printed volume of this collection, and also in "A Little More Relevance" by Tony Cimasko in his online essay in this collection. Each year, every one of the more than two hundred NWP sites across the country holds an intensive four-week summer institute where teachers from all grade levels and disciplines come together to write and to learn about the teaching of writing. And every summer these teachers discover how remarkably similar the process is at all levels of education.

### **Living and Learning between the Extremes: The Personal and the Creative in the Writing Classroom**

At first, the summer institute participants don't necessarily see why high school teachers need to be reading about teaching writing to elementary school students and elementary school teachers need to be reading about teaching writing to high school students. But their reading and discussion quickly dispel these attitudes. They come to see that most research in the field shows that good writing and good writing instruction share similar features that merely vary in application within the contexts of different grade levels and different content areas.

Here are some of the universals that we have learned:

- We know that good writing comes from work students are interested in, whether that is because the writing is personal or because it deals with a subject the students care about.
- We know that good writing has a sense of voice; it is the antithesis of standardization and formulae.
- We know that good writing comes from writing done for a real audience and a real purpose—that the best writing has a living recipient.
- We know that good writing connects life and literature, whether that means students are seeing themselves in a character from a novel or that students are writing for a practical purpose.
- And most important, we know that good writing empowers the writer and the reader, but especially the writer. When Marcy Rudge’s kindergartners write letters to senior citizens, the seniors are made to feel their worth and the students learn to respect life. When Dale Griffith’s prison students write personal essays, they develop the literacy skills to transform their lives and perhaps the lives of their children. Certainly, we know that most of our students live and learn between these two extremes, but we also know that all other goals of writing are, ultimately, subordinate.

To us, “writing on the same page” means writing about actual lived experience for a living, breathing audience. It means being creative. It means allowing writing about literature to reveal something about the writer. We understand that some teachers will read this and question whether such emphases will succeed in teaching students the critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in college. Granted, the transition from the personal to the analytical remains a challenge to be faced. It always will be. But a student who loves being creative with language and who

functions comfortably with his or her own ideas and words will make this transition much more successfully than the student who has mastered the skills but missed the passion.

It should be noted that all the teachers who have contributed to this piece assign and teach a great deal of traditional writing—expository, persuasive, and analytical essays. They must do so in order to help their students prepare for the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMTs) and Connecticut Aptitude Test (CAPT) and to fulfill the requirements of their curricula. For this essay, however, most have chosen to share personal and creative assignments. This is because the contributing teachers share the beliefs that standardized testing, as well as a lack of vertical communication in the field, has all but expelled personal and creative writing from most classrooms. We all see a lot of writing that is grammatically and technically correct, even writing that is intelligent and insightful at times, but that is sterile, boring, and formulaic. Like Casey Maliszewski suggests in her essay in the printed version of this collection (“Home Schooled”), the teachers contributing to this essay believe that personal writing provides the foundation for good expository, persuasive, and analytical writing and that creative writing promotes originality that can make a piece of written work exceptional. Their research and experience have taught them that the personal and the creative are what can transform competent student writing into brilliant student writing.

Our goals for this chapter are to demonstrate the similarities in the teaching of writing at all levels, to stress the need for the personal and the creative in the teaching of writing, and to emphasize the need for the kind of vertical communication and professional development that is so central to the National Writing Project.

**All Writing Is Autobiography: Good Writing Begins with Personal Writing**

Most of the teachers trained by the Connecticut Writing Project accept Donald Murray's assertion that all writing is autobiography. Even when the subject matter is not the least bit autobiographical, our writing remains autobiographical "in the *way we write*" (67, italics mine). Our perspective, our choice of details, our choice of metaphors, our syntax, our word choice—all these things reflect something personal. These are the features that create voice and enable us to read a piece and say, "Yes, that's Donald Murray" or "That's Ernest Hemingway" or "That's the tall boy in the back row of my fourth-period class." Anyone can learn how to punctuate a sentence. How to structure an argument. How to organize a five-paragraph essay. Voice, as we all know, is much harder to teach, and this is in large part because it is personal. I cannot teach students how to be themselves, but I can create an environment in which they begin to figure it out on their own.

To accomplish this in their classrooms, many of the teachers who have contributed to this essay use a writers workshop model adapted from the work of Lucy Calkins. But much of the theoretical work upon which the writers workshop model is based came earlier than Calkins' seminal 1987 text. The workshop model arose from the research of Donald Graves, Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee, James Moffett, and others. In *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, Moffett argues for "structuring English curriculum according to the relations of speaker–listener–subject as the ultimate context within which all our other concerns may be handled functionally and holistically, moving the student in his writing and reading from one kind of actual discourse to the next in a sequence which permits him to learn style, logic, semantics, rhetoric, and literary form continuously through practice as first or second person" (12–13). What Moffett is saying here is that students should begin with personal writing such as journals,

eventually moving to memoir and autobiography before tackling the more objective third-person genres of biography, history, fiction, and then, ultimately, argumentation.

In fact, here in Connecticut, this was the *initial* thinking behind the development of the CAPT. In the earliest versions of this test, students were asked to read a short story and then respond in six brief essays that began with a very personal initial response to the story and culminated with the application of a theory of good literature. Unfortunately, whereas Moffett would have had the students participate in a similar sequence over an extended period of time, treating each response as a discrete draft to be revised into a lengthier piece, the state of Connecticut chose to have the students complete this assignment in one sitting and to treat what should have been six rough drafts as a single, assessable final product. Thus we see what bureaucracy can do to even the best research in the field.

In the contribution that follows, Tara Achane discusses how she uses personal writing and the writers workshop model to get students writing, to help them develop voice, and to teach the craft of the art itself.

### **Voice Matters: Writers Notebook and Authors Craft in the Middle School Classroom**

Tara Achane teaches fifth-grade language arts and reading at Mansfield Middle School in Mansfield, Connecticut. Fifth grade is a critical year. As Cheryl Hogue Smith points out in “‘Botched Performances’: Rising to the Challenge of Teaching Our Underprepared Students,” many students begin to hate reading around fourth grade. Tara’s job is to reclaim these students. Tara’s teaching provides a terrific model for how to do this by beginning with the personal and transitioning to craft. Tara emphasizes three things in her classroom—voice, community, and craft. In her effort to promote voice and the sense among the students that “their voice matters,” Tara begins each year with memoir and urges students to write about personal topics that matter

to them—topics that help us map our world, giving us the ability to face important truths about our lives. Then, once students have amassed a collection of personal stories, Tara looks through her students’ writers notebooks in order to observe what they have written about the experiences that have impacted their lives. She helps the students to identify the pieces that have the most potential to be transformed into writing that is meaningful and purposeful. Because the students are writing personal stories and trying to develop and express their own voice, Tara strives to create a community that is immersed in the study of writing, in which students must learn to be considerate and insightful readers and responders to the writing of their classmates. Only then will students be comfortable choosing to write about poignant topics. Once this environment is established, the next step is to learn craft, to get students to read, think, and write like writers.

Tara begins this next step by doing research of her own. “I look for specific text examples that demonstrate elements of craft,” she says, “and then use them as read-alouds during the start of a writing unit. I may use Sandra Cisneros’s ‘Eleven’ or Corrine Demas’s *Saying Goodbye to Lulu* as examples of memoir.” Tara models for the students how to understand the impact of words as a writer. For example, students may practice writing the internal thoughts of a character or describing the setting in a way that creates the mood of their experience. The students are encouraged to ask themselves how authors create voice through word choice, modification, figurative language, syntax, and other elements of good writing. And then the students practice developing their own voice. An important part of this process is Tara’s guidance. She helps students to formulate their ideas so that when they are discussing their writing, they are using the language of a writer. Without such guidance, she says, “student writing will be just that—writing. Students will appear to be in the act of writing, but not necessarily be invested in the act of writing.”



The following excerpt from an essay by José Rodríguez demonstrates student willingness to write about what Tara calls poignant topics, and their ability to craft personal experience into a recognizable example of a particular genre—in this case, memoir.

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*from A Robbery*

by José Rodríguez

One day when I came home from school there were police cars parked around my house and my dad was waiting for me to get off the bus. I could tell that something was wrong as soon as I looked at my dad's face. Suddenly, I was feeling worried and my heart was beating really fast. I thought my family was hurt.

I heard the police talking about something. I tried to listen to hear exactly what they were saying, but there was too much noise all around my house. I asked my dad what happened. He didn't answer—all he did was stare at the police officers.

I carefully walked inside the house. That's when I saw that there was a robbery in my house. . . . I couldn't believe it! I saw my mom on the table, crying and upset. Her face was red as the police were talking to her. They were trying to get as much information as they could. Just then the police saw the robbers drive down our road! . . .

Minutes later the robbers got away. My dad drove back to the house. He was as quiet as when I got off the school bus. His eyes were dark and clouded. My family and I felt really sad. We wanted the robbers to get caught, but there was nothing we could do. We had to wait and hope that the police would find them. It was a very sad day for us. . . .

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In his piece, José strives to accomplish two things he learned from Tara's craft exercises—to provide detail and to build tension. Rather than simply say his mother was upset,

José demonstrates this by describing how she is seated and what her face looks like. He experiments with figurative language, as when he describes his father's eyes as being "dark and clouded." And he learns to withhold details and other information to make the reader keep reading in order to learn the next piece of information. Although he is not yet writing literary analysis, José is learning about details, facts, and analogy and how to craft an effective structure—all necessary skills for the more mature writing he will be required to do later in his secondary career.

### **What Would You Write If You Weren't Writing This for a Class? Deinstitutionalizing Writing in the High School Classroom**

For the majority of my high school teaching career at RHAM, I taught juniors and seniors. Since the CMTs end after eighth grade and the CAPT is taken sophomore year, I never had to worry much about standardized tests. I did, however, have to concern myself with preparation for college: literary research papers on the curriculum of the college prep sections of American literature, college application essays in senior English, free response essays on the exam for the Advanced Placement Literature and Composition and Language and Composition courses. These were my concerns. And so for years I required my students to read literature and write essays of literary analysis. I chose good books. I had them discuss the works in a seminar style, sitting in a circle and taking turns being responsible for leading the discussion. I encouraged students to come up with their own paper topics. I had them draft and conference. I took them to the university library to conduct research with the help of an undergraduate research librarian. I did not stifle them with five-paragraph essays. I tried to be innovative in the ways I taught. And by and large I did a good job and was successful.

But I perceived a lingering disconnect of some kind. And over time I came to the conclusion that one of the strangest things we do in the teaching of English is ask students to read stories, plays, and poems but to write only academic essays. We only rarely ask our students to read academic essays (maybe “Once More to the Lake” but not Gross’s “The Tragic Design of *The Scarlet Letter*”), and we never ask them to write fiction, drama, or poetry. We elevate these genres of literature as important subjects of study and reverence, even, but we never let the students try their hand at them. Instead, we ask them to dissect them like professional literary critics, usually without allowing them to even so much as look at a work of professional literary criticism—very likely because they would be too difficult for most students to read!

We also refuse to accept the fact that most students will not become literary scholars or English teachers. For some of us, many of our students will never attend college, but even those who do will probably major in (and later work in) nonliterary fields. And most of us really have no idea what the writing they will be required to do in those fields will look like. If students are going to be English or education majors, we can tell them. Otherwise, their guesses are as good as ours! With these ideas in mind, I designed an elective course at RHAM High School that strove to deinstitutionalize reading, writing, and research. I wanted to make the reading and writing done by students in school look more like the reading and writing done by literate adults outside of school, an important goal stressed elsewhere in this volume by Casey Maliszewski and by Steven Schmidt in his essay “Moving the Tassel from the Right to the Left.” I wanted the students to read and respond to literature and to write well, but I did not want to limit their responses to literary criticism and academic essays. I wanted the students to have a great deal of personal choice in what they read, researched, and wrote, and I wanted them to feel free to aspire to being authors themselves.

For the design of The Contemporary American Novel class, I chose a wide range of books. *Beloved* was on the reading list, as was *Blood Meridian*, but so were *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, and Wally Lamb's two novels. I was concerned with Good Books not Great Literature. But the most important element was how I ran the class day to day. Students could select from any of the novels on the curriculum, so long as at least one other student in the class was reading the same book, as in a book club. Each unit of study, for lack of a better term, lasted four to five weeks. For two weeks the students read, kept a reading journal, and met with their book club members to talk about the book. After two weeks I rolled in our laptop carts and the students began doing online research on anything related to the books. If they were reading *She's Come Undone*, students could do literary research on the book or biographical research on Wally Lamb, but more likely students researched topics such as obesity, rape, or divorce. The groups had to prepare a twenty-minute, research-based presentation to be made to their classmates. These could take *any* form. Many groups chose simple methods of presentation such as a PowerPoint slide show, but I also saw everything from puppet shows to interpretive dance (both quite well done, I might add).

The next week was spent in response groups, composing papers and giving and getting feedback from their peers and me. Unlike the presentations, the papers were individual assignments, but, like the presentations, they could be on *anything* related to the book. My mantra to the students was, "What would you write if you were writing this for yourself and not for a class?" I got some academic essays, but mostly I got papers that looked more like personal essays. One girl who read *Brothers and Keepers* interviewed her dad about his brother. Here is an excerpt from her essay.

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*from A Missing Link*

by Heather Campbell

As soon as my father was old enough to understand the importance of having siblings, they had already moved out, and moved on with their lives. He became an only child in a house with a hardheaded father and a mother that was not too far behind her husband. He did not travel as much as I had thought. "Often I was left home with my mother while my dad traveled." My father's life was anything but easy, although he got away with a bit more than his brothers did. That was recognized as another thing which set him back with Steve. . . .

The biggest and final separation of the two brothers was when their father died. My father was still in his teens. Bob died at home in his teens. I think it was the hardest situation my father has ever had to deal with in his life. Towards the end of the grieving period, Steven decided he was going to take things from the house. My father was helpless to his brother's actions because Tina was so blind with the loss of her husband that she allowed him to do what he wished.

It is a very difficult thing to even think about not having a relationship with a sibling, although my dad won't admit it. It's another sad fact that I have an aunt, uncle, first cousins, and even second cousins, which I have not once met. If there was one thing that my father said that upset me most and made me realize just how little of a relationship the two boys had, it was this: "I don't even know what my brother is. All I know is that his name is Steven Campbell and he is twelve years older than me."

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Prior to this course, Heather had never asked her father about his brother. She had never conducted an interview and never had to think about how hard it is to write good questions or

how to shape responses to those questions into a coherent narrative. She never thought too much about how the books she read for school actually related to her life. This course and this assignment changed all this. As Patrick Sullivan points out in his essay in the printed volume of this collection (“What Can We Learn About ‘College-Level’ Writing from Basic Writing Students?”), when students have a concern for the subject matter of their writing, they make a better effort to write well. This assignment helped Heather to make the important connection between literature and life. The responsibility of telling her father’s story and honoring his experiences made her take seriously the jobs of conducting the interview and writing the paper. And the overall project brought her closer to her father. Had I assigned this book to the class and subsequently presented the students with a generic assignment to write a thesis-driven essay analyzing the relationship between John Wideman and his brother, I’m sure Heather would have been competent enough to hand in a decent essay, but the book would have remained a distant and impersonal subject of study. The paper would have been a perfunctorily completed assignment, done for a grade. And there would very likely have been little connection to Heather’s father.

One criticism some might make of such an assignment is that it falls short of the rigorous analysis required for college-level writing. After all, she’s merely crafting an interview into a personal narrative. But I would argue that Heather was significantly better prepared after completing this assignment to write that analytical piece. She contemplated a subject of inquiry. She considered what questions to ask to draw out the best, most useful responses. She modified these further as she proceeded. She then took the information garnered from her research and considered how best to shape and present it in order to offer her readers a coherent essay. In short, she read her father as a text, partially against the text of Wideman’s novel, and offered her

readers an interpretation of that human text. In a lengthier course, along the lines of Moffett's suggestions, the next step in the assignment might be to write a traditional analysis of *Brothers and Keepers*, informed by what has been learned from the process of writing this more personal piece.

### **Learning to Write Is Like Falling in Love: Engaging the Standardized Tests and Beating Them at Their Own Game**

Although I pointed out that the next step for my former student Heather might be to write an analytical piece about Wideman's novel, teachers should not necessarily assume that such writing is always and exclusively what college teachers are looking for, even in the English major. In his introduction to *Assignment Guidelines for Freshman English*, the handbook for teaching assistants at the University of Connecticut, Tom Recchio et al. emphasize that

Assignments and goals don't map in a one-to-one relationship, but assignments are communicative strategies as well as attempts to elicit certain kinds of work. . . . [The] assignments for these classes should require that students do something with their reading beyond literary criticism. (35)

Such a goal does not and should not be limited to college courses but should be the province of every level of education.

Kelly Andrews-Babcock taught elementary school for many years before becoming a K-4 literacy coach at Killingly Memorial School in Danielson, Connecticut. Though Kelly no longer has a classroom of her own, she works closely with her teachers, observing their classes and helping them to become better teachers of writing. Kelly also cofacilitates the Connecticut Writing Project's Summer Institute, teaching teachers from all grade levels. Although they teach elementary school students rather than first-year college students, the teachers who work with

Kelly aspire to goals similar to those articulated by Tom Recchio for the graduate students teaching first-year English at UConn. In Kelly's experience, the CMTs have snuffed out poetry and other forms of creative writing in schools across Connecticut. Administrators and classroom teachers live in such fear of having a low CMT score posted in *The Hartford Courant* that they teach exclusively and narrowly to these tests. They fear that creative writing is a luxury they cannot afford because it would deviate from the goals of the CMTs. However, the fourth grade poetry unit at Killingly Memorial was designed to directly engage the CMTs and beat them at their own game, so to speak. Rather than fearfully teach to the test, mapping goals and assignments in a one-to-one relationship that will fail to move the students' writing beyond the narrow goals of the CMTs, Kelly and her colleagues created a poetry unit designed to foster a love of poetry *and* prepare students for the CMT.

The unit required students to complete four performance tasks linked to CMT objectives: to read fluently, to comprehend meaning, to interpret and evaluate, and to write effectively. Students began the unit by reading lots of poems by various authors. Then they worked in small groups to offer ideas about the message and meaning of the poems they'd read. This was followed by whole-group discussion. Kelly acknowledges that this part was difficult for many teachers, who may have been unsure of the meaning of any number of poems. "I remember sitting with a student reading a poem and asking her what she thought. She looked at me and said, 'I don't know.' I looked at her and said, 'Me either—let's read it again and talk about it.'"

The third task required the students to write a paragraph explaining their interpretation of ten poems by at least six different authors. The goal was to enable the students to understand poetry with an insider's appreciation of how poetry works. And, though this was a difficult task, along the way students discovered favorite poets such as Eloise Greenfield, Langston Hughes,



Shel Silverstein, Valerie Worth, and Douglas Florian, and the works of these published poets became mentor texts, which assisted the students with the fourth performance task of crafting their own poems. As students wrote, they worked in response groups and conferenced with their teachers, while teachers delivered mini-lessons on craft. In the end, students completed books of six original poems, three of which were shared at a schoolwide poetry reading. On the night of the reading, the students begged to read more poems when they were done. The following day, the students concluded the unit with an essay about what they had learned. For Kelly, what was most satisfying about this project was learning from these essays about how students didn't think they would like poetry but had fallen in love with it. For precisely this reason, we believe that these kinds of assignments lead to good writing.

The following poem was written in imitation of the voice of Langston Hughes. The pieces that follow the poem demonstrate the interpretive and metacognitive writing of the second and fourth tasks. All were written by the same student, Hannah Higgins.

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Rain  
by Hannah Higgins

Rain  
Shhh Baby Shhh  
Or no one ain't a goin'  
Nowhere until you stop  
Crying

So Shhh Baby  
Or no one never gonna  
Be happy no more  
But I know it's gonna do  
Good for the flowas

But Shhh Baby Shhh  
Or your liquid will drown  
Everyone in sorrow  
So you need to stop that cryin'

Shhh Baby  
And rub those big cotton  
Ball eyes of yours  
And stop that raining  
Baby Shhh

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### **Written Reflections of Poems**

Poem: "Baby"

Author: Langston Hughes

I think the author wrote this poem because he wanted to teach little kids to not play in the road. I noticed that there was a southern accent in it. The person Albert in the poem, sounded like he was getting scolded. Why did Langston write in an accent? I really liked this poem!

Poem: "Jazzonia"

Author: Langston Hughes

I think Langston Hughes wrote this poem because he likes jazz music. He says "six long-headed jazzers play". I think he means six tall jazz players are on stage. He also talks about a dancing girl. He connected Eve and Cleopatra to her.

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### **Poetry Workshop Self-Assessment**

*Directions: This self-assessment will require you to do a lot of reflecting on this unit that we did. There are several questions below that you may choose from to write your self-reflection. I am looking for a well-written piece that explains how and what you learned during this unit. Please use the questions as a guide if you wish.*

- *Did you enjoy Poetry Workshop?*
- *Name some of the strategies that you used while reading poems.*
- *Did you have a favorite poet?*
- *What did you get out of writing reflections?*
- *What have you learned about presenting poetry orally?*

- *What writing strategy helped you the most during this unit?*
- *What was the hardest/easiest part about writing poems?*
- *What was the hardest/easiest thing about this unit?*
- *Tell me what the most important things are that you learned.*

I just loved having poetry in this room. I thought it brought us more together. At first I thought another boring unit. But it was very fun. This unit brought my love for poetry even higher.

The one strategy that I used for poetry would have to be re-reading. I would not survive in poetry if it was not for re-reading. I also talked to other people about the poems. I really didn't use that a lot though. This helped me to understand poetry.

Do I have a favorite poet? I would not live without reading Langston Hughes's poetry. Let me tell you I pretty much only read his poetry. He is like my hero of all heroes. He just inspired me so much that I just had to write at least one poem like him. He is just the best poet I have heard of so far.

It was a little nerve-wracking to read my poetry in front of all those people, but after a while it was really fun.

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Hannah's three pieces demonstrate several admirable goals of the teaching of writing. In the interpretive responses, Hannah indicates an awareness of diction and voice when she identifies what she calls Hughes' accent. She also quotes directly from Hughes' poems and catches the literary allusions to Eve and Cleopatra. In her reflection, she communicates an understanding of the importance of re-reading and of discussion. In the poem itself, Hannah demonstrates an ability to manipulate language so as to imitate style, tone, and diction. But the most exciting thing for Kelly and for Hannah's other teachers was clearly her expressions of love and admiration for poetry in general and the poetry of Langston Hughes in particular. In the long

run, this is likely more crucial to making Hannah a successful writer (and reader) than any set of skills she could have learned. Some students spend a lifetime in school and never develop this ability.

### **What Is Academic Writing? Writing in the Different Content Areas and Academic Disciplines**

One of the main things the CWP does is provide professional development services to schools across the state. Sometimes I provide this training myself, and in this capacity I often encounter the assumption that college professors have very rigid and narrow expectations for the writing their students will do. Recently, a colleague and I provided professional development services to the members of the English and social studies departments at a local high school. We were asked to discuss college-level writing in English and history. Each high school department was dealing with the fact that some of its teachers were wedded to the five-paragraph essay and a direct instruction model that involved teacher-crafted writing assignments, prescriptive rubrics for assessment, no use of response groups or conferencing, and no drafting or revision. The teachers employing this model defended it as preparation for college. We were asked to come in and dispel that assumption.

The day began with a reading of Lynn Bloom's essay "Insider Writing," in which she describes an assignment she gave her undergraduates in a course on American autobiography to design a house using aesthetic principles from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The assignment requires that the students compare two works from two different authors and time periods and to find a new form for the resultant text. Two of Lynn's students from that class later won an award for a coauthored piece that was tailored to the submission specifications of *Better Homes and Garden*. I asked the high school teachers to begin

the day by reading this piece because I wanted to be able to say to them, Look, this is college-level writing. It's creative. It's original, even personal in the sense that the students were able to choose how to approach the task. The students are still reading and writing about serious literature, but they are being asked to do so in nonstandard ways. A five-paragraph essay would never have won those two students the award they received.

Lynn Bloom is in my department at the University of Connecticut, and she holds a chair endowed by Aetna. Some of the funds from Aetna help fund our summer institute. So it is not surprising that Lynn's ideas and approaches have had an influence upon all of us affiliated with the CWP. Becky Caouette is a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at UConn, concentrating on composition. She attended the Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute in 2002 and worked for a time as one of the graduate assistant directors to the Freshman English program. In the following section, Becky discusses how she transformed a course along lines that are reminiscent of the assignment Lynn devised for her autobiography course. It is also very similar to the Genre Hunt assignment described by Tony Cimasko in "A Little More Relevance" in the online essays in this collection.

Becky teaches advanced expository writing, and, as she notes, "The catalog description of the course is pretty vague: writing on topics related, usually, to students' individual interests and needs." So Becky designed a course in which students researched their major, determined the kinds of writing they would be doing for their career, and completed assignments that approximated the real writing they could expect. "The more I think about how and what I want to teach," Becky says, "the more I see that asking students to write in a vacuum is unfair to them. Most of my past assignments have asked students to write about a topic of my choosing; the total readership of the resulting essay is often myself and, in draft form, a handful of the student's

peers. But having students actively invested in the work they do, and knowing that, in the end, this might influence the way they see writing in their lives—these are my current pedagogical goals.”

One thing Becky discovered was that she had to call the final assignment “a seminar paper or *project*,” because not all majors and careers convey information in a fifteen-page essay. She had to assess a variety of projects, from term papers to PowerPoint presentations, portfolios, and spreadsheets accompanied by budgetary narratives. For the students, it was a great opportunity to learn to work in multiple media, to consider those media as texts, and to think critically about the literacy expectations of their career choices.

Becky and her students asked themselves “exactly what ‘academic writing’ is, who determines it, and how it changes from major to major.” They discovered that the reading and writing that some of the students had been asked to do in the past three or four years was not relevant to the types of writing they would be doing every day, formally and informally in their careers. As frustrating as this discovery was for some students, for Becky it was an acceptable outcome because she wants her students to discover something about the world of writing that will be useful and relevant to them.

The design for Becky’s course perhaps best embodies the ultimate goals of the work her CWP colleagues are doing at earlier levels of education. Becky’s students are writing real pieces that cater to real audiences in a specific field. They are writing what they are interested in because they are writing for and about their major field. They by and large love what they are doing because they have the independence to choose their subject matter and their genre. Their pieces have a strong sense of voice because the students are confident and knowledgeable about

all aspects of the assignments. The pieces are original, and also usually creative in the best sense of that term.

### **How Can a Kindergartner Change the World? Service Learning as a Model for Writing Instruction**

Becky's course might seem like a logical place to end the discussion, but I want to emphasize that the kind of ambitious, encompassing, creative work Becky is doing with upper-division undergraduate students at UConn can and is occurring at even the earliest levels of education among CWP-trained teachers throughout Connecticut. In her kindergarten classroom at Annie Vinton School, an elementary school down the street from UConn, Marcy Rudge has her kindergartners doing many of the same things Becky does with her twenty-one- and twenty-two-year-old undergraduates.

Although she does not use the term, Marcy's instruction closely follows a service-learning model that is similar to the three models described by Tom Liam Lynch and Kerry McKibbin in "When Writers Imagine Readers," in the online essays in this collection. In her model, Marcy uses writing to connect the classroom community to the larger community. Marcy says that it is easy to teach kindergartners to write, and it is easy to teach them to take responsibility for their community, because "kindergartners just get it." Marcy teaches her students that "if there is no soap in the dispenser, they write a note to ask the custodian to fill it. If they have hurt someone's feelings, they draw a picture to apologize." But writing in Marcy's classroom doesn't stop with the practical or the personal. Marcy takes her guiding principle from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Marcy says that community service is simple. "When [you] discover something is not right with the world, [you] go to work to fix it. If

a person is hungry, you give him/her food. If a child has no toys, you share your toys. If animals are homeless, you find them homes. These are not naïve answers.”

Marcy’s kindergartners read and write every day. She uses journals and art, especially drawing, as tools for writing, and students also go online to study “great illustrators and writers such as Ezra Jack Keats and Eric Carle. We read their bodies of work. We research their lives. We compare their styles. We try to copy them. All great masters learn from those before them.” They also use literature as the basis for their community-based writing. For instance, in November, the students read *Button Soup* and *Stone Soup*, and afterward have a Stone Soup Feast. They collect soup cans and nonperishable food items for a local food pantry, with students writing notices that are sent home to parents.

Students participate in a similar project in December, when they make “caring baskets” for the Covenant House, a local shelter for the homeless. First the students read *The Family Under the Bridge*, and then the “kindergartners draw and write lists of what their neighbors need.” These lists are then distributed to parents, teachers, and other adults from the community, who collect “homemade cookies, toys, books, soap, baby food, and mittens.” The students wrap these items themselves and write accompanying cards that say, “Wishing you a Happy Holiday. Your Friends, Kindergarten Kind Bears.”

In the spring, students read *Now One Foot, Now the Other* by Tomie de Paola and learn about disability and aging. They write personalized cards to senior citizens at the local nursing home and then visit them. Later, they write storybooks about “the circle of life and their responsibility to care” for their elders. They first draw their stories, and then they discuss their stories with one another and give each other suggestions. Marcy takes on what she calls “the role of editor. I provide supplies, time management, and technical support,” such as word processing.



Similar projects are conducted in October for the Firefighters' Children's Fund and in February for a local animal shelter.

Marcy likes to end the year with a reading of *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney. As Marcy explains, "Miss Rumphius provides a recipe of how to have a great life." One must do three things: "Travel and have all the adventures you can. Make as many friends as you can. Make the world a more beautiful place." Marcy says that she leaves her students with these words from Miss Rumphius because they are "the words that will help them grow as writers [and] the words that have helped them change the world."

### **Writing on the Same Page and the National Writing Project Approach to Professional Development: Teachers Teaching Teachers, Kindergarten through College and Beyond**

One of the foundations of the National Writing Project's approach to professional development is that teachers from all grade levels should work together, from kindergarten through college and beyond, including adult education, continuing education, and the teaching of teachers. One of the great things about such a mix is being able to see how teachers from such different levels approach similar pedagogical goals. In preparation for our collaboration on this essay, each contributor prepared a paper for a panel discussion at the third annual Freshman English Writing Conference, held in March 2008 at the University of Connecticut. The teachers and one student on the panel worried that the mostly college-level participants—college writing program administrators, college professors, and graduate students studying rhetoric and composition—would have little interest in the work of a bunch of K–12 public school teachers. They also worried that no one would attend the panel and that those who did attend would respond critically and unsupportively.

We are delighted to report that this did not happen. The panel was extremely well attended and well received. The question and answer period that followed was rich, lively, and productive. Afterward, a colleague of mine who runs the writing program at one of UConn's regional campuses gave the panelists a well-intentioned but left-handed compliment when he said to me, "That was great! It's really nice to see some public school teachers who *get it!*" I suppose it has been a long time since my colleague has been in a K–12 classroom, so I will give him a pass on the left-handedness of his compliment. But I want to emphasize that many public school teachers *do* get it; the CWP goes to great lengths to ensure this outcome and to make sure that teachers from all levels come together and get *it* together—and get to see that other teachers at other levels get it, too.

Public K–12 teachers face very different pressures from those of the professors and graduate student instructors at our host university. They are forced to deal with standardized state tests. They teach without stop for seven or more hours a day. They have many more students. Professors at UConn typically teach two courses a semester, capped at nineteen students in a section if they are writing classes, for a total of thirty-eight students a semester. A high school English teacher might have two-thirds that many in one of her five sections! In poorer districts, there certainly are teachers who have that many in one class. Elementary school teachers might only have twenty-something students, but they have them all day, without break.

So, after all this, what can we say about good writing practices that will lead to successful college-level writing? We believe we can make a few simple suggestions for anyone preparing students to write for college:

- Embrace personal writing.
- Avoid formulaic assignments and genres like the five-paragraph essay.

- Allow students to have a choice about what they read and how they write.
- Find an audience and purpose for the writing students do that is greater than the teacher, their classmates, and getting a grade. Provide the means for helping students discover their audience and purpose.
- Allow students to write creatively. Even traditional genres can be enhanced by originality and voice.
- Provide mentor texts and model your own writing process for students.
- Allow students to revise their writing. No writing in the real world is ever done in one draft.
- Allow students to work together on their writing. Even Nobel Prize winners have editors.
- Communicate with other teachers, particularly those who teach students at the grade level just below and just above yours, to find out what they do and what they expect.

This last piece of advice is one of our essential goals at the Connecticut Writing Project. We bring together teachers from all grade levels and all disciplines to do the kind of writing and research that higher-education colleagues are expected to do year-round. And then we keep the teachers involved and informed through a variety of professional development services offered throughout the year. In this manner, we keep everyone on the same philosophical and pedagogical page. By adhering to these recommendations, we are confident that by the time our students are ready to write for college, they *get it*, too.

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